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**Knowing the Name of God**  
**By Rav Yehuda Rock**

The opening verse of our *parasha* is opaque and difficult to understand, and the commentators have battled to explain it. In this *shiur* we shall attempt to shed some light on the verse, both locally and in its broader context.

Let us first consider the unit with which the *parasha* begins, recording God's words to Moshe:

And God spoke to Moshe, and He said to him: I am the Lord.

I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov as El Sha-dai, while My Name Y-H-V-H I did not make known to them.

And I established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojourning, in which they dwelled.

And I have heard the sigh of Bnei Yisrael, that the Egyptians are enslaving them, and I have remembered My covenant.

Therefore, say to Bnei Yisrael: I am God. And I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I shall save you from their bondage, and I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments,

And I shall take you unto Me as a nation, and I shall be your God, and you will know that I am the Lord your God Who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt

And I shall bring you to the land which I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, and I shall give it to them as an inheritance. I am God. ([Shemot 6:2-8](#))

Let us now analyze this unit – the context of the verse in question - as a whole.

God's monologue may be divided into two main sections, with the word "therefore" indicating the transition from the first to the second. The second section describes the plan and objectives for the Exodus, while the first section provides the background motives. Aside from the central content of each of these two sections, the second section also begins and ends with the same words – "I am God" (6,8)— and the same expression also introduces the unit as a whole (2).

According to the above division, verse 3 belongs to the section describing the motives for the Exodus. Actually, a glance at the verse itself shows that we need not necessarily categorize it thus. However, in verses 3-5 we find two appearances of the word "*ve-gam*" (and also), with the second appearance (5) clearly representing a link between two independent motives for the Exodus: "I promised the forefathers to give them the land of Canaan, and I have also now heard the sighs of Bnei Yisrael in their servitude, and therefore I shall take them out from under the burdens of Egypt, to bring them to the land." For this reason it seems that the first "*ve-gam*," too (4) comes to add further motives over and above the first one, described in verse 3. We still need to explain the meaning of this verse, and how that which it describes can represent an independent motive for the Exodus from Egypt.

Further proof that verse 3 describes a motive for the Exodus is to be found in the continuation of God's words. The expressions of redemption in the second section – in the description of the plan and objectives for the Exodus – allude back to the descriptions of the motives. Thus, "I shall deliver you from your servitude" is a response to "I have heard the sighing of Bnei Yisrael." Bnei Yisrael, in their pain and suffering, need deliverance from their slavery. "And I shall bring you to the land which I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov" is the complement to "I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan... and I have remembered My covenant." Similarly, it would seem that "And **you shall know** that I am **the Lord** (Y-H-V-H) your God" is meant to fill the void of "My Name Y-H-V-H I did not make known to them." This void represents a motive for the Exodus: since this Name was not known to the forefathers, it is now time for Bnei Yisrael, through the process of the Exodus from Egypt, to come to know God by this Name.

Thus, God's desire that Bnei Yisrael know Him, His divinity, by the Name Y-H-V-H, is an independent motive for the Exodus from Egypt. However, this still leaves us with much to explain.

As noted in the *shiur* on *Parashat Shemot* the verses here are based on God's revelation concerning circumcision. When God says in our *parasha*, "I appeared to Avraham... as El Sha-dai," the reference is to His words (parts of which were also repeated to Yitzchak and to Yaakov) to Avraham at time of his circumcision. There we read:

The Lord appeared to Avram, and He said to him: **I am El Sha-dai**. Walk before Me and be perfect.

And I shall make My covenant between Me and you...

... and God spoke to him, saying:

As for Me – behold, My covenant is with you...

I have established My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you, for their generations, as an eternal covenant, **to be your God**, and for your descendants after you.

And I shall give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojourning – all the land of Canaan – for an everlasting possession, and **I shall be their God.** ([Bereishit 17:1-8](#))

Aside from the fact that these verses describe the covenant whereby the land of Canaan is promised to the forefathers as an inheritance, as mentioned in our *parasha* in verse 4, God's words also describe the main meaning and intention behind the circumcision: for Him to be our God. This intention had been revealed already to Avraham, but since God presented Himself there as "El Sha-dai," rather than with the Name Y-H-V-H, Avraham had no knowledge of this intention through that Name. Only through the experience of the Exodus will this void be filled, when Bnei Yisrael will know that God – through the Name Y-H-V-H – is their God.

On the basis of the above, it would appear that in our unit under discussion, the auxiliary phrase of verse 7 – "I am Y-H-V-H your God" – should be read as, "I am Y-H-V-H – your God." The Name Y-H-V-H in this clause is part of the subject, not the object. (This conclusion is also supported by the *mesora*.) The sentence is not meant to establish that "the Lord is our God" since that fact was known already since the time of Avraham – but not concerning the Name Y-H-V-H. From

this point onwards it will also be known that the Holy One, blessed be He, by His Name – Y-H-V-H – is God.

The intention behind circumcision, then, is to create a relationship between the nation (Avraham's descendants) and God. During the period of the forefathers, this vision was realized only in part. The completion came with the Exodus from Egypt, with the raising of the level of the relationship in such a way as to include inculcation of the consciousness of the relationship including also the Name Y-H-V-H.

Later on we shall attempt to explain these two levels of relationship and the change that is expressed in the transition from the Name "El Sha-dai" to the Name "Y-H-V-H."

Let us now pay attention to the verse in question.

The commentators have trouble with the factual assertion that "My Name Y-H-V-H I did not make known to them." A cursory review of *Sefer Bereishit* shows this not to be true: Avraham is told, "I am Y-H-V-H Who took you out of Ur Kasdim" ([Bereishit 15:7](#)), and Yaakov is told, "I am Y-H-V-H, the God of Avraham your father" ([Bereishit 28:13](#)).

Most of the commentators have attempted to understand the Names "El Sha-dai" and "Y-H-V-H" as representing different attributes of God. Accordingly, they interpret the words "My Name Y-H-V-H I did not make known to them" not as a factual assertion that God never presented Himself by this Name, but rather that He was not revealed to the forefathers through a certain attribute. Rashi and Rashbam, for instance, explain on the basis of the context in our *parasha* that the Name Y-H-V-H represents the attribute of fulfilling promises. Ramban suggests that the different Names by which God is known is a matter of differing levels of prophecy and revelation. Ibn Ezra adopts a different approach. He draws a distinction between the Name Y-H-V-H as a noun, and the same Name as an adjective.

Unquestionably, though, the simple meaning of the verse is that God did not reveal the Name Y-H-V-H to the forefathers. As noted above, this clearly contradicts the verses in *Sefer Bereishit* that tell us that God explicitly told the forefathers, "I am Y-H-V-H."

A different approach to this contradiction may be arrived at through the exegetical methodology (implemented in previous *shiurim*) known as the "*shitat ha-bechinot*," developed by my Rav and teacher, Rav Mordekhai Breuer.<sup>[1][4]</sup>

Some of the instances where we have used the "*shitat ha-bechinot*" in the past have concerned localized narratives, occupying a single chapter. However, alongside these specific applications, there is also a general division into "aspects" of all of *Sefer Bereishit* and continuing into *Shemot*, and perhaps even further. Throughout *Sefer Bereishit*, the two aspects make use of two different Names of God. There is the aspect that consistently uses the name "Y-H-V-H" (sometimes appearing together with the name "Elokim"), and there is the aspect that uses either "Elokim" or "El Sha-dai" (and in one unique instance, the name "Y-H-V-H" – to be discussed below).

One of the proofs of this distinction is precisely the contradiction noted in our discussion above, since only on the basis of this distinction can the contradiction be resolved on the level of the simple, literal text. If it is clear, in *Sefer Bereishit*, that God did in fact appear to the forefathers by the Name Y-H-V-H, and here God states explicitly that He was not revealed to them by this Name, then there must be two different systems at work here. Within the "aspect of the Name Y-H-V-H," God was indeed revealed to the forefathers by the Name Y-H-V-H. However, within the "aspect of the Name Elokim" He was not revealed to the forefathers by the Name Y-H-V-H, but only by "El Sha-dai"; it is only in our *parasha* that God reveals the Name Y-H-V-H within the aspect of the Name Elokim. Actually, the term "aspect of the Name Elokim" is somewhat misleading: "Y-H-V-H" is also part of this aspect, but within the story of this aspect, the Name Y-H-V-H is revealed, for the first time, in our *parasha* to Moshe.

We still need to explain what all of this means. My Rav and teacher, Rav Breuer, addresses the significance of these distinctions in his own scholarship, but we present a different explanation here.

There are two separate differences between the two aspects with regard to God's Names:

· Difference in content of the story: As noted, in the story of the aspect of the Name Y-H-V-H, God is revealed to the forefathers by the Name Y-H-V-H; in the

aspect of the Name Elokim He is not revealed to them by that Name, but rather by the name El Sha-Dai ("I am El Sha-dai"). It is only here, for the first time, that the Name Y-H-V-H is revealed within this aspect.

· Difference in the style of the narrative: The aspect of the Name Y-H-V-H adopts the Name Y-H-V-H, while the aspect of the Name Elokim invokes the Names "Elokim" and "El Sha-dai" (as noted, there is one exception to this rule, which we shall discuss below).

It would appear that the second distinction is based on the first. In the aspect of the Name Elokim, the Torah emphasizes and highlights the fact that the Name Y-H-V-H has never yet been revealed by avoiding use of this Name even in the reporting of the events to the reader. The aspect of the Name Y-H-V-H, on the other hand, adopts no such limitation, and so the Name is used.

In other words, the Torah's consistent use of different Names for the different aspects does not arise from the fact that the Names, in terms of their inherent meaning, express fundamental characteristics of those aspects. Rather, it represents a literary device that serves to emphasize the difference between the stories of the two aspects with regard to the historical stages in which God's Name was actually revealed in the two aspects.

Before presenting a comprehensive theory concerning the phenomena that have been noted thus far, let us summarize that which requires explanation:

Firstly, the story of the Torah as recounted in the aspect of the Name Elokim demands some explanation. In this aspect, the Torah tells the story of a lengthy historical process in which God is revealed to the forefathers, by the Name "El Sha-dai," but not by the Name Y-H-V-H. In these revelations God forges a covenant with the forefathers, the crux of which involves the creation of a nation-God relationship, but at this stage it is still without knowledge of the Name Y-H-V-H. Later on, nearer to the time of the Exodus, God is revealed to Moshe through the Name Y-H-V-H. God wants to inculcate the consciousness of this Name amongst the nation, and this intention in and of itself represents an independent motive for the Exodus (based on our discussion in the *shiur* on *Parsahat Shemot*, we may add that this had also been the motive for the descent to Egypt in the first place), aside from the need to fulfill God's promises and to deliver Bnei Yisrael from their suffering.

Secondly, we need to understand the difference between the two aspects: Why is that that within the aspect of the Name Y-H-V-H, the forefathers were already able to have knowledge of the Name Y-H-V-H?

Much has been written concerning the Name Y-H-V-H itself. It appears that the word should be understood, as Rashbam (*Shemot* 3:15), Chizkuni and others have explained it, as the third-person form of "Ehyeh," as we understand from the verses there (3:13-15): "Moshe said to God... And they will say to me, What is His Name? – what shall I tell them? And God said to Moshe: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. And He said, So shall you say to Bnei Yisrael: Ehyeh has sent me to you. And God said further to Moshe, So shall you say to Bnei Yisrael: The Lord God of your forefathers... has sent me to you. This is My Name forever, and that is My remembrance for all generations." The meaning of "Ehyeh" ("I will be") and of the Name Y-H-V-H, may be a reality that we cannot grasp of conceive of, such that God is telling Moshe that His reality will be (exist), but it will be impossible to know. Alternatively, it may mean that God's existence and reality will continue forever (Rashbam, Chizkuni and others) in a reality that is independent of His creations and their lives.

However, it would seem that the essence of the meaning of the Name Y-H-V-H – at least within the context of our discussion – lies not in its etymological form, but rather in the actual use of this specific Name. In contrast to the Name "Elokim" and other Names of God, which are in fact words that describe God's relationship and workings in the world, the Name Y-H-V-H is God's "personal name," as it were. The Name "Elokim" is like "King" or "Master"; the statement "Y-H-V-H is Elokim" is, on the linguistic level, the equivalent of saying "David is king." We may refer to David simply as "King," but the title applies to him because of his relationship with his nation and his land; it is not his personal name. The same applies to God; only Y-H-V-H is His "personal name."

(The proper interpretation of the Name "El Sha-dai" is more complicated, and we shall not elaborate here. For the purposes of our discussion, suffice it to say that it is not God's real "personal name.")

In order to understand the importance of knowing God by His "personal name," let us consider the significance of the concept of "name" in Torah.

In *Sefer Devarim*, the site of the Temple is referred to as "the place which the Lord your God will choose to make His

Name dwell there" (12:11 and elsewhere). God's "Name" is that which God "causes to dwell" there – i.e., the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence). The name "*Shekhina*" is a term that has its origins in rabbinical literature; it exists nowhere in *Tanakh*. The root "*sh-kh-n*" does appear in *Tanakh*, usually as a verb, while the noun that the Torah uses to refer to the *Shekhina* is "name."

Thus, the word "name," in addition to its primary significance, also has the borrowed meaning of "fame," as well as the specific (also borrowed) meaning of "Divine Presence," Divine glory and majesty. This use of the word is understandable if we consider that the significance of the "causing to rest" is that this is the place of the revelation and publicity of God's will and His glory; it is from there that His Name proceeds.

This meaning of the word "name" was known to *Chazal*. The comment as follows on the words of the people who sought to build the city and the tower of Bavel – "We shall make ourselves a name": "Rabbi Yishmael taught: 'Name' refers to idolatry" (*Bereishit Rabba* 38,8); "They said: He [God] cannot decide to appropriate the heavens to Himself and relegate us to the lower world. Let us make for ourselves a tower, and we shall place an idol at the top of it, and we shall put a sword in its hand, so that it will appear to be waging war against Him" (ibid. 6). *Chazal* understood that the word 'name,' in the general sense, denotes Godly presence. Where the Name concerned is the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, then the reference is to the *Shekhina* – the holy Divine Presence. In other instances, *le-havdil*, it refers to pagan divine presence. Ramban also invokes this concept in the context of the tower of Bavel: "But a person who knows the meaning of 'name' will understand their intention from their words, 'We shall make for ourselves a name,' and will appreciate the enormity of what they were intending to do, by means of the tower, and will understand the entire matter. For they planned an evil scheme...."

Now we can understand that in our case, too, when God says, "My Name Y-H-V-H I did not make known to them," what He means is that the covenant with the forefathers did not reach the level of creating a presence of God through a revelation of His will and His glory in the world. It was only with the Exodus from Egypt that the covenant between God and Israel was able to establish God's Presence in the world.

The knowledge of the Name Y-H-V-H – i.e., the knowledge of God by His "personal name," expresses God's Presence and His glory as manifest in the world through the actions of Bnei Yisrael within the context of their covenant with God.

Obviously, the difference between the covenant with the forefathers and the covenant of the Exodus reflects the difference between the individual and the community. God's Presence in the world as expressed by the individual (as active as he may be in his Divine service) and his impact are quite unlike God's Presence in the midst of the community, with the attendant impact on the world.

The aspect of the Name Elokim emphasizes this qualitative difference by describing the covenant of the forefathers as lacking the Name Y-H-V-H. Only a covenant with the community is truly able to serve as a chariot for the Divine Presence in the world.

As a literary device aimed at emphasizing the absence of God's Name in the world, not only is this Name not made known to the forefathers within this aspect, but the narrative itself, within the aspect of the Name Elokim, avoids making use of the Name Y-H-V-H up until our *parasha*. Only in one place in *Sefer Bereishit* does the Name Y-H-V-H appear within the aspect of the Name Elokim, and that is at the occasion of the circumcision: "God (Y-H-V-H) appeared to Avram, and He said to him: I am El Sha-dai... and I shall give My covenant..." (17). The Torah seeks to emphasize that the covenant of the forefathers, which materializes for the first time in this utterance concerning circumcision, is focused and leads towards the covenant with all of Bnei Yisrael – the covenant in which the Name Y-H-V-H will become known to Israel. For this reason the Torah emphasizes that it is the same God Whose Name Y-H-V-H is destined to be revealed to Israel, Who is now forging the covenant of circumcision with Avraham. The Torah makes this point only once, in this instance. Throughout the rest of the *Sefer*, the Name Y-H-V-H is avoided in the aspect of the Name Elokim as a literary device that is intended to highlight the difference between the narratives of the two different aspects concerning the historical stages in which God's Name was actually revealed.

On the other hand, the forefathers, too, were party to a covenant with God; they worshipped Him and, to the extent that they were able, as individuals, they also publicized His Name in the world. In comparison with the common efforts of Bnei Yisrael throughout the generations, their impact was limited, but as individuals their efforts had great power. The aspect of the Name Y-H-V-H emphasizes the ability of the individual to act and to make his contribution to *tikkun olam*, by describing the forefathers as knowing His Name – the Name Y-H-V-H – and as "calling out in His Name."

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[1][1] Rav Breuer sets out his approach, and the commentary in which he implements it, in his books *Pirkei Mo'adot*, *Pirkei Bereishit*, and *Shitat ha-Bechinot Shel ha-Rav Mordekhai Breuer*. According to this approach, God writes the Torah in layers, with narratives or halakhic units that parallel one another – different "aspects" – each of which is able to stand alone and to be read in its own right, such that sometimes they appear to contradict one another. Often, these aspects are intertwined, creating a complex or multi-layered unit. This complex unit blurs the points of transition between one aspect and the other, but highlights the difficulties inherent in these transitions. Each story expresses its own independent content, which is important in its own right; however, there is some relationship between them, which justifies their integration into a single text. By delving into the difficulties that arise from the joining together of the two aspects – such as repetitions or contradictions – we are able to expose the two independent "aspects," and thereafter to explore their significance.

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